DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 518 PS 011 563

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TITLE Observations on Parenting and the Women's Movement.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.; Memphis State Univ., Tenn.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Dec 80
CONTRACT 400-78-0008
NOTE 4p.: Paper presented at the Symposium on Parenting, Memphis State University (Memphis, TN, March 12, 1979).
AVAILABLE FROM In "Parenthood in a Changing Society" available from: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, College of Education, University of Illinois, 1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820 (Catalog No. 190, $5.00)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Rearing; *Feminism; *Parent Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Parenting

ABSTRACT

Written by a journalist, this brief article presents impressions of the influence of the women's movement on attitudes about parenting. (Author/RH)

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# Observations on Parenting and the Women's Movement*

Ellen Goodman

The Boston Globe

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I'm an observer of social change. I think in a way every journalist is that. We write about the news, and what we write about today is wrapping the fish tomorrow. I personally have been most intrigued with changes in our society and in our private lives, and that has brought me to look at parenting. Our role as parents makes a very strong link between our public and private lives, for as parents we are both members of the wider community and individuals with very private concerns.

I've written most consistently about what I consider the single major change in my own life--the women's movement--which I think of literally as the movement of women from one pattern to multiple patterns and especially the movement of women into the work force. What I would like to talk about today is the relationship between the women's movement and the way we are as parents.

To being with, I think it is quite remarkable how much our attitude toward working mothers has changed in the 10 years I have been one. I became a mother in the usual way. . .I decided to stay home in order to give my daughter a good start in life. I didn't go back to work until she was 6½ weeks old. Seriously, though, at that time, in my office, I was the only working mother with a preschool child. When I first came back to work people kept saying things to me like, "And who takes care of your daughter while you work?" About the eighth time I was asked this question, I was tempted to say, "Oh I just leave her at home with the refrigerator door open."

Today things are quite different. Some 48% of mothers work outside the home. The Bureau of Census has finally given up asking, "Who's the head of the household?" The only mother who hasn't changed is that wonderful woman in the commercial about "ring around the collar." My sister is waiting for her to ask her husband why he doesn't wash his neck.

As an observer, I see people confronted with change in their lives. I decided several years ago to write a book about how people change, not how much or how little but how. I went around the country interviewing people. The first thing I realized was that change isn't a single thing. Change is one of those words that should have 38 definitions. For example, we all say that people resist change, and yet

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* Presented March 12, 1979

there are changes that are as uninteresting to us as a change in clothes and some as restful as a change in scene. We're most anxious about change when it threatens us with some kind of loss or crisis. In talking with people I found that they can deal with loss or changes around them in two contradictory ways. They have both the desire to beat a hasty retreat to the past and the opposite desire to take a great leap into the future. It's like preparing for a long, hard journey. We want to stay home or to know that wherever we are, we can close our eyes and be there.

In the early days of the women's movement, there was much concern about roles of men and women, fathers and mothers. Women at the time divided into two camps, two kinds of extremes. On the one side the radical feminists questioned traditional assumptions about women's roles in child bearing and child rearing. On the other hand we had a group which I can only call the radical reactionaries, among them Helen Andelin. I don't know how many of you have read her book called The Fascinating Female. It recommends, among other things, that women get off the highways. Helen Andelin is to the right of Marabel Morgan. My favorite line from Andelin's book is, "When you're having a fight with your husband, stamp your feet and beat on his chest. Men love this." Well in some ways these extremes presented the rest of us with a conflict between having to go back to a traditional family or having to go on to no family at all. This was neither possible nor palatable.

Now what has emerged out of this argument between extremes is a new middle. The appeal to the new middle can be seen in the current leadership of the pro-change and anti-change groups. Phyllis Schlafly of the "Stop the Era Movement" is the leader of the anti-change movement. She is a law student, a writer, a political activist. Her followers often cite her credentials and people will say to me, "Even though she is a mother, she. . ." On the other side you have the National Organization for Women, which is headed by a housewife, Ellie Smeal. I think this says something about the new middle that both groups are trying to appeal to. I think it notes that we all have a desire to achieve in the world without losing our home life.

When we talk about change, we're caught between what we want and what we fear. We want more and not less, particularly in the domain of families and family relationships. As the roles of men and women change we want everything we've had and more. We want independence and security. We want careers and children. In short, we want it all.

Where have these expanding desires left us as parents? I think in my own lifetime we've gone from Supermom to Superwoman. Supermom, for those of you who don't remember or don't have one, was the one who always made homemade cookies with carrot teeth and raisin eyes. She always had "something lovin' in the oven." Her kids always had homemade Halloween costumes. She had a wide wardrobe, consisting exclusively of aprons. She was always nurturing. For years we have carried her around in our heads, just for the guilt of it. Now we have replaced her with Superwoman or Supermom II, whose typical day is

something like the following: She wakes up her 2.6 children. They go downstairs and she gives them a Grade A nutritional breakfast which they eat, and they all go off to school without once forgetting their lunch money. She goes upstairs and gets dressed in her $300 Anne Klein suit and goes off to her $25,000 job which is both creative and socially useful. After work she comes home and spends a wonderful hour relating with the children, because after all it is not the quantity of time but the quality of time that is important. She then prepares a gourmet dinner for her husband. They spend time working on their meaningful relationship, after which they go upstairs where she has multiple orgasms until midnight.

What about Superdad? The Superdad is always caring, sharing. He is able to leap tall emotional boundaries in a single step at the same time he is becoming Vice President of General Motors. Fathers are supposed to be feeling, and achieving, and attending their children's school plays.

In this Supermom II and Superdad images, I find not only new strivings but a lot of fear. I see many mothers afraid to let go of their own power over their children's lives. I remember interviewing a mother with a young baby. The father had agreed to take the baby out and they were only going around the corner, but before he got the baby out of the house, she had given him a list of instructions. I see a lot of that inability to share the responsibities of parenthood.

At the same time, it is much harder to be a full time homemaker and mother. A friend of mine in Washington, D.C., told me recently that being a housewife in Washington is somewhat less socially acceptable than being a transsexual. Work outside the home was once a "no-no," then an option, and now a requirement.

I talked with a college student whose mother had recently commented, "Oh, you have so many more choices than I did." Actually I think we're living in a time when the choices are pretty tough. Choice is a funny word that means both options and decisions. Options are easier than decisions. We're living in a time when mothers and fathers are told we can have it all; yet we know we can't, because time is the ultimate pie and it's never big enough. Knowing this makes us feel like personal failures when we compare our lives to Supermom II and Superdad.

We are feeling guilty not only because we don't fulfill the old roles, but because we don't fulfill the new roles either. Our inadequacy is brought home to us by those wonderful people, the early childhood people. Now we are told that if we don't hang the right mobile over the crib at 18 months, our children will never get into Harvard at 18 years. One of my favorite advertisements, which ran in our paper, carried the following challenge from Burton White: "Will your children remember you for what you did for them or for what you did to them?" I'm grateful my daughter was four before I found out it was all over at three. This has helped our relationship enormously.